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S/CT; NSC FOR ABRAMS AND YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/10/2018
TAGS: PTER ASEC PREL CASC AU TS

SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN NATIONALS REPORTEDLY TAKEN HOSTAGE BY
AQIM IN TUNISIA

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has claimed via a statement posted on the Internet that it has taken hostage two Austrian tourists who were traveling in the southern Tunisian desert. An official source cited by the Tunisia Africa Press Agency confirmed that the two Austrians entered Tunisia on February 10, but suggested that they had been abducted in Algeria, not Tunisia. The Austrian Ambassador was initially skeptical of the reported hostage taking but is meeting with the MFA today to seek more information. We will continue to follow this story closely and will report accordingly. Results of an EAC will be reported septel. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) on March 10 issued a statement on the Internet claiming that it had kidnapped two Austrians within Tunisian territory on February 22. The AQIM statement provided the names, professions, and passport numbers of the Austrians -- Wolfgang Ebner and Andrea Kloiter (whose last name Austrian press reports have given as "Kloiber"). The AQIM statement indicated that the Austrians were in good health and that they were being treated in accordance with Islamic law. The statement also stipulated that a future communique would detail AQIM's demands for the hostages' release. It also carried a strongly worded warning to Western tourists to avoid travel to Tunisia, whose "apostate" government "kills our brothers for every drop of blood" even while "our brothers' throats are getting cut in Gaza by the Jews in collaboration with western nations."

¶3. (SBU) Responding to the AQIM statement, the Tunisia-Africa Press Agency (TAP) on March 10 cited an official source who cast doubt on whether the Austrians had been captured on Tunisian soil. The TAP release, reported in local media, confirmed that the two Austrians had entered Tunisia on February 10, but, citing a call they had placed to a German tour operator, suggested that the two had gone "deep into the desert beyond Tunisian borders." TAP's source indicated that Tunisian authorities had launched intensive air and land search operations, once they learned of the Austrians' disappearance. The source concluded, "So far, there is no element that proves that the two Austrian citizens are in Tunisian territory or that they were kidnapped inside Tunisian borders."

¶4. (C) On March 10, in two separate telcons with Ambassador, the Austrian Ambassador expressed doubt about the veracity of the press reports, noting that the fact of the Austrians'

disappearance while traveling in the desert had been widely reported in the Austrian press. Once it became clear that AQIM had the Austrians' passport numbers, however, he was less certain. The Austrian Ambassador is today conducting additional meetings at the Foreign Ministry to ascertain any additional details.

15. (S/NF) Comment: We will continue to seek additional information about this case and will continue to report accordingly, via State and GRPO channels. Specifically, we will seek to confirm a) whether the Austrians have indeed been taken hostage by AQIM; and b) if, so, whether they were taken while they were in Tunisian territory. Results of an EAC, set for this afternoon, will be reported septel. End Comment.

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